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CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

168 888 539 THE DRAGALEVTSY of 1937 had much in common with the Dragalevtsy of the past centuries. The dances, the homes, and the farm practices proved that. The differences were also marked. For instance, a crude but efficient means of population control in the good old days was the killing off of the old people when they had passed the period of active usefulness. That at least was the theme of an old folk tale still current in the village. "It so happened that one spring the people discovered that they had saved no grain for sowing. The king sent men everywhere in search of grain, only to see them return empty-handed. One son, who at considerable risk to himself had kept his aged father alive, secretly hidden in his home, told him of the people's distress. The old man said: 'Tell the people to go to the ant hills for grain.' Some of the men followed this suggestion and found the grain they were hunting. When the king learned that an old man had told them where to look he ordered that the aged should not be killed for their disability but should be kept alive and respected for their wisdom."

175 Just at what time this story became a part of the folklore was difficult to determine, because of the numerous racial mixtures which the people represent. The Pechenegi, according to all accounts, might have been the ones who practiced this parricide. They got themselves into the history books by driving the Magyars (the modern Hungarians) westward from what is now Russia in the latter part of the ninth century. For about two hundred years more they, allied first with one prince and then with another, raided tribe after tribe and lurked near important trade routes. In 1091 the Pechenegi who had survived previous setbacks were finally destroyed by the Crusaders under Peter the Hermit, and little was heard of them after that.

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888 cide was by that time an out-of-date practice no longer linked with the precarious economic existence of a wandering people.

539 888 593 But it was a far cry from the cessation of the killing of aged parents to the "Honor thy father and mother" of the Decalogue, which later became a part of the Bulgarian family system. The peasants had another story to explain this dramatic change:

"In the olden days, when fathers died the sons would drag the bodies with a hook to a stream or gully and push the bodies in. One day a middle-aged man returned home from disposing of his father's body in this way, but failed to bring back the hook. Whereupon his own son in greeting him said:

" 'But, father, where is the hook? What will I use when I drag you away?'

"This made the father thoughtful, then remorseful. It was then that he retrieved his father's body and gave it a proper burial. Since then sons have been more respectful."

593 562 175 186 At any rate, whatever may be the explanation, the patriarchal system with its respect for and obedience to the father won out. Contact with Byzantine culture until the coming of the Turks must have reinforced the Bulgarian father's right to dominate his family. He became more fully acquainted with the *patria potestas* which had been too strongly entrenched in the Roman family system to be forgotten by the Byzantines. Likewise, the patriarchal emphasis of the Old Testament and the Pauline epistles of the New aided in the continuance

175 of male supremacy. It is fascinating indeed to observe the response that the Slavicized Bulgarians made to the Byzantine culture in general. First they opposed cultural assimilation by force of arms; more than once the armies of the Bulgarian kings thundered at the gates of Constantinople in Bulgaria's proud golden age (about 900). Military expeditions, however, proved inadequate, with the result that the Bulgarian leaders sought to build a Slavic culture to rival that of the Greeks. It was this new culture which kept the feeling of national uniqueness alive among the Bulgarians, while other tribes upon entering that region became so thoroughly absorbed into the Byzantine Empire that they ended as curious names of the past with no modern representatives.

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Then came the Turks in the fourteenth century to begin a reign which lasted five hundred years. It was in this period, termed by Bulgarians *Igoto* or The Yoke, that Dragalevtsy was supposedly founded.

A pregnant sow was the beginning of it all. At least, so the villagers said. Two or three hundred years ago this particular sow ran away from home and grunted up the mountainside to bear her litter in the brush. Baba Dragana, a widow who owned the animal, after a long search found her on the spot where the village church now stands. Since the old woman could not carry the animals back to her village, just south of Sofia, she built a small hut where she was. She liked the place so much that she decided to stay; finally she persuaded her former neighbors to join her. The Turks who robbed them in the village on the highway, she argued, would not harm them on the mountainside. Besides, there was an ample supply of delicious water near her new shelter. The ten families who joined her began to call the settlement Dragalevtsy in honor of Baba Dragana, and the name has remained to this day.

Baba Dragana was also known for her fiery patriotism, as well as for "eternal beauty, strength, and power," if we are to believe an old folk song. This beauty was noticed by the Turkish Pasha in Sofia, and led to frequent meetings between Dragana and him. Years passed. Dragana lost her beauty but retained her strength and power. One day a Bulgarian shepherd, wounded and beaten, stumbled into her yard. Before he died three days later Dragana learned that Turkish shepherds, enraged because his animals had entered their pastures, had fallen upon him. This was too much for Dragana. She called her sons about her, armed them with pitchforks, and sent them out to avenge the death of a fellow countryman. Blood for blood. A few days later their yard was surrounded by Turkish soldiers who promptly bound the sons and carted them off to Sofia for a summary trial before the Pasha. Death was their sentence. But just before the execution the bold Dragana appeared to ask indignantly if the Pasha knew what he was doing. "These are your sons that you are about to put to death," she said. "If you do not believe me, see how much they resemble you." Confused, the Pasha looked at Dragana's sons, saw the resemblance, and called off the death sentence.

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527 This was the peasant version of the Sabbath being made for man, not
857 man for the Sabbath.

One holiday which children particularly enjoyed was New Year's Day, which, like Christmas, came two weeks later than our own because of the Old Style Calendar still in use by the church. Boys and girls were up at break of day to tap every passer-by with a gaily decorated branch of a cornel cherry tree. As they tapped they chanted:

[539]

Fresh, fresh New Year
Happiness to the end.
Let mother and father be healthy
Like the past year!

Striking with a cornel-twig higher than the cap;
Wishing you a houseful of corn,
Yellow as the gold,
To ripen early, early in
The fields during the summer.

Let wedding guests again pass by
With full wine casks
To present us with white kerchiefs
And embroidered belts.

Fresh, fresh New Year,
Let us get sister married! . . .

With this chant they wished good health. In return they expected a coin or something to eat. This tapping continued until nightfall. [772] Most members of the family looked sleepy during the day because they had stayed up late the night before to gamble. Their success or failure on New Year's Eve was supposed to foretell what luck the new year had in store.

Early in the morning the older boys and girls told fortunes by gathering around a copper kettle in which each one had placed some identifying article, such as a ring or knife. The group sang a song, connected with some occupation, while one token was drawn from the pot. If a boy's token was drawn, the occupation described would be his; if a girl's token was drawn, then she would marry a man engaged in that occupation. After this they all danced the *horo*.

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six times before falling motionless. The least skillful contestant received a beating from the others.

Na machuklin (In New England called "Peggy"). Consisted chiefly of tapping the end of a small stick so that it would rise into the air to be hit again before it fell to the ground.

Na Kokumish. This was a form of tag played by children sitting around in a circle.

Na gonenitsa (Form of running tag). The one to be "it" *(gogan)* was chosen by "counting out" with the use of the following poem, which corresponded to "eeny, meeny, miney, mo":

[539]

Ala bala nitsa,
Turska panit:a,
E, gidi Dancho,
Nash kapitancho.

Ala bala nitsa,
A Turkish plate,
Hey, you Dancho,
Our leader.

The children when counting out spit on their fingers. The *gogan* would run and try to touch the others.

Na zhmish (Hide and seek). The one who was "it" said the following poem while the others hid:

[539]

Dve vrabcheta
Se skaraka
Na Popovota vrata.
Pop izleza i im kazva
Ish, pish, tish, stesh, mish.

Two sparrows
Quarreled
At the Priest's gate.
The Priest came out and told them
Ish, pish, tish, stesh, mish.

After he said this he went to hunt the others. Wherever he found anyone he spit in the place where he was. The others tried to run to the homebase and spit there before he did.